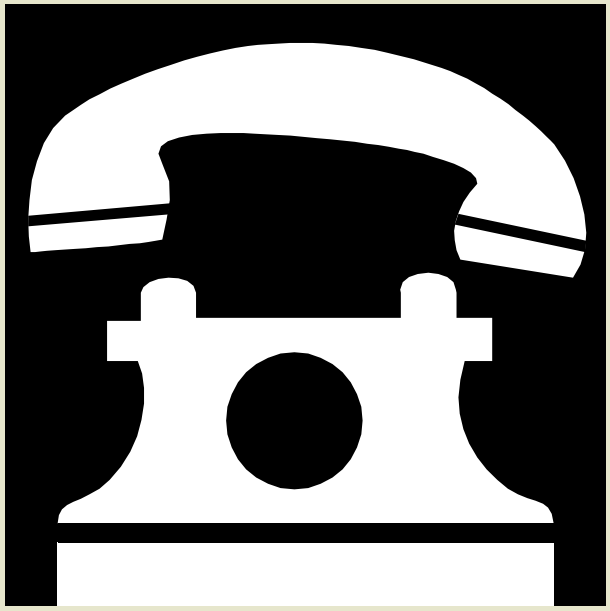

Accessing the Internet

How to avoid per-minute charges on calls to access the Internet and increase your modem speed

State of Wisconsin

When it comes to your phone service, we know you have many questions. The State of Wisconsin's TeleWatch program will give you plain talk about your telephone service.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSC) does not regulate the Internet, nor Internet Service Providers. The PSC does have jurisdiction over the telephone lines and telephone services used to reach your Internet service provider.

The Internet is a vast, interconnected web of computers. Most personal computers and telephone customers connect to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) which provides the connection to the Internet. Customers can connect to their ISP either by using their voice telephone lines and a modem, or by using more advanced services.

Beware of per minute charges on calls to your ISP

The PSC has received complaints from consumers with telephone bills in the hundreds of dollars...just for accessing the Internet. There is little that can be done after the fact, so consumers need to be careful. Remember, when you access the Internet you are also placing a telephone call. Be sure you know how you will be charged for the call.

There are a few ways that consumers can inadvertently place a call that generates per-minute charges when calling to access the Internet.

- **You can't tell by the phone number**
  You may be incurring per-minute charges even if you do not dial "1" before the telephone number with Extended Community Calling (ECC) calls to a neighboring exchange. In an effort to promote equality of local calling areas, ECC was authorized by the PSC in 1993 and only affects calling that was previously considered long-distance calling to exchanges that are either adjacent to or within 15 miles of the caller's exchange. ECC rates vary from 3.4 to 8 cents per minute, depending on the company. Because you don't have to dial "1" before a telephone number when placing an ECC call, some consumers may think they are accessing the Internet through a local call; they may actually be running up large phone bills.
- **Software that dials automatically**
  Some Internet providers will give customers software to install on their computers with automatic dialing capability. If the first number is busy, the software may dial a secondary number. The telephone number the computer automatically dials may result in ECC or long distance charges. Check your system.
- **"Free" Internet service offers**
  Be careful of "free" Internet service offers. There will always be charges for the telephone connection to access the service, these may be ECC or long distance calls. An Internet provider may not have the correct information on whether or not a telephone number for a customer in a specific area would be priced at per- minute rates.
- **Different calling areas**
  New competitive local telephone companies may not have the same local calling area. Check with your company. If the customer's Internet provider subscribes to a company with a different calling area, the customer may run the risk of inadvertently placing a toll call when accessing the Internet.

Here are some tips on what consumers can do to avoid being charged per minute when accessing the Internet:

- Be careful. Ask questions.
- Before signing up for service to access the Internet, ask the prospective Internet provider whether or not the numbers you would be dialing through your computer incur per-minute charges.
- Verify this information with your local telephone company by either looking in your telephone book or calling a customer service representative (not the long distance or directory assistance operator). Once on the Internet, SBC customers can look up their local/ECC calling area at www.ameritech.com/lca.
- Look over your monthly telephone bill carefully to make sure you are not being charged per-minute rates when accessing the Internet.

What to do if your modem is not connecting at its rated speed

Modems allow computers to communicate over standard phone lines. Modems have a maximum rated speed. They can also connect at lower speeds, if faster speeds result in too many errors. If your modem consistently connects at a lower speed than that listed on the box, this could be due to a number of factors:

⇒ **Your hardware and software settings**
Make sure that the dip switches and other settings are set correctly. Likewise, make sure that the dialer program is not set for a low data transmission speed. Information on how to do this can usually be found in your modem manufacturer's and/or ISP's frequently asked questions (FAQ) web pages.

⇒ **The wiring inside your house**
The wiring inside your house may affect modem speed. Make sure all connections to wall jacks throughout the house are tight. Try disconnecting other phones and answering machines, especially inexpensive ones. Make sure your phone cords do not run too close to fluorescent lights or TV sets.

⇒ **NID**
To determine if the problems are inside your home, or are in the network, you should connect your computer directly to the network interface device (NID). The NID is generally located on an outside wall. The NID contains a standard telephone jack, which connects your inside wiring to the telephone company circuits. You can (temporarily) disconnect your inside wiring, and plug the computer modem directly into that jack. Now connect to the Internet — if the speed improves, the problems is in your inside wiring. If not, it is in the network. After the check, remember to reconnect your inside wiring.

⇒ **Your telephone line**
If the problem is not in your modem's configuration or inside wiring, it may be in the lines connecting to your local phone company. Your local telephone company can check your line, and may be able to give you some improvement. Telephone companies are required to ensure that lines provide 9.6kbps (thousand bits per second) speed and the telephone company may not be able to economically improve a line that already provides at least that speed.

⇒ **The telephone network**
Occasionally, a problem may be caused by parts of the telephone network other than your local line, such as busy trunks or overloaded switches. Fortunately, these problems are fairly rare. If all trunks are busy, you will hear a "fast busy" signal or a recorded announcement asking you to try your call later.

⇒ **Your Internet service provider (ISP)**
Once the call reaches your ISP, the call must connect to one of the ISP's modems, which connects you to the Internet, email, or other service. If you get a normal busy signal when calling the ISP, it indicates that all of the ISP's lines are in use. If you get a connection, but no modem response, it probably indicates that all of the ISP's modems are in use. These are not telephone company problems - they indicate that the ISP is receiving too many calls at that time.

⇒ **The Internet itself**
Once you have connected to your ISP, your speed is dependent on the slowest part of the connection. That might be your phone line, but could equally likely be the Internet itself, or the server supplying information on the other end. Some websites may have slow servers or become congested due to the number of people accessing them. No matter how good your connection, you cannot receive data faster than it is sent out by the server.

Alternatives to basic phone lines for data transmission

If modems do not meet your data transmission needs, there are several alternative services to consider. These services may be expensive however, and are not available in all areas. The services include:

* **DSL**
The term DSL stands for any type of digital subscriber line. DSL comes in a variety of speeds, ranging from about 280 kbps up to 1 Mbps (million bits per second) or more. DSL service is not yet available in all areas. Special equipment is needed, but is often supplied by the DSL provider. Some ISPs not only support DSL, they will also handle ordering and installing DSL lines for their customers.

* **Cable modems**
Cable modems are a data transmission service designed to run over advanced cable TV systems. Cable modems are fast, up to 30 Mbps, but the bandwidth is shared. This means that large numbers of simultaneous users can cause slower speeds, although those speeds are still much higher than dial-up modems. Contact your local cable TV provider to find out if this service is available.

* **Satellite Internet services**
Some satellite dish providers also offer high-speed data transmission via a dish. Such dishes do allow users to download information from the Internet at several hundred bits per second, but not all services allow uploads. Customers may still have to use a standard modem to up-load information, including email, documents, and the mouse clicks used to navigate the Internet.

* **Dedicated higher speed data lines**
These lines are generally available and provide high-speed access, but are expensive - generally costing several hundred to several thousand dollars up front, plus fees of a few hundred dollars per month, and require specialized equipment.

Internet Voice Communication

Internet Voice Communication allows you to talk over the Internet with no long distance charges. You do have to pay the cost to be connected to the Internet and any long distance or extended community calling charges to reach your Internet service provider. If you have a microphone, speakers and sound hardware, you can talk to other people through the Internet provided the person on the other end is also online and has the appropriate software and hardware.

Who can help?

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin is the state agency that oversees the telephone industry. Most local and in-state telephone billing and service complaints may be directed to the PSC. Call or write to:

P.O. Box 7854
Madison, WI 53707-7854
(800) 225-7729 (800-CAL-PSCW)
TTY (608) 267-1479
Fax (608) 266-3957
E-Mail: pscrecs@psc.state.wi.us
http://psc.wi.gov

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection mediates and investigates telecommunications complaints, including those regarding mail and phone solicitations, deceptive and misleading marketing, and long distance rate changes. Call or write to:

P.O. Box 8911
Madison, WI 53708-8911
(800) 422-7128
TTY (608)224-5058
Fax (608) 224-4939
E-Mail: datcphotline@datcp.state.wi.us
http://datcp.state.wi.us

The Wisconsin Department of Justice enforces state law, including telecommunications. Write to them at:

123 West Washington Ave.
P.O. Box 7857
Madison, WI 53707-7857
www.doj.state.wi.us

The Federal Communications Commission is the federal agency that oversees the telecommunications industry. Call or write to:

Consumer Protection Branch
Common Carrier Bureau
445 12th St., SW
Washington, DC 20554
Toll-free (888) 225-5322 (888-CALL FCC)
Toll-free TTY
(888) 835-5322 (888-TELL FCC)
www.fcc.gov

Bilingual service / Servicio Bilingüe

The Public Service Commission (PSC) is also able to provide customer assistance in Spanish. When calling the PSC, please ask to speak to a Spanish speaking representative.

En la Comisión de Servicios Públicos del estado de Wisconsin (PSC) podemos asistirles en español. Cuando llame a la PSC, pida hablar con un representante de habla hispana.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin does not discriminate on the basis of disability in the provision of programs, services, or employment. If you are speech hearing, or visually impaired and need assistance, call (608) 262-8524 or TTY (608) 267-1479. We will try to find another way to get the information to you in usable form.

This brochure was produced jointly by the WI Public Service Commission, the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and the WI Department of Justice.

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